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# Evangelical Investigations

DAVID DARK

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During the summer months, my pastor regularly enlists me to address a weekly gathering of homeless individuals who endure a half-hour or so of devotional time just before partaking in what we've come to call "The Wednesday Lunch." By way of praise and thanks, he recently complimented my use of the Socratic method in my interaction with the assemblage and remarked that he'd prefer that kind of conversational approach himself if he had the stamina for it. For better or worse, he explained, he usually resorts to a half-hour sermon. I replied that I've never had the stamina for putting together sermons. In fact, in my classroom and in the company of whoever turns up to hear me speak now and then, the gathered eventually realize it's the Socratic method or nothing, because I don't know how to do much else. For better or worse, I have plenty of things I want to say, but it's usually the give and take of a good conversation that will get it out of me.

Needless to say, the months following 9/11 would note a slight change of emphasis in the conversations that fueled my class of high school sophomores. Orwell's *1984* and E.M. Forster's *Passage to India* had always resonated with the headlines and issues of the day, as we sought to apply scenes and passages to our everyday world. But an E.M. Forster quote that usually inspired little more than a sigh had now taken on the weight of treachery: "If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend, I hope I should have the guts to betray my country." I've found I don't have to spend nearly as much time explaining nationalism and its discontents. They know what I'm talking about. They can feel it.

It was out of the tangents afforded by these classroom discussions, and the ensuing conversations with parents and teachers, that I began cobbling together the notes that would become *The Gospel According to America: A Meditation on a God-blessed, Christ-haunted Idea* (Westminster John Knox, 2005). For many years, I'd taken comfort in association with historic Evangelicalism. I'd reference Wilberforce and Bonhoeffer as exemplary figures within the tradition and note, with Karl Barth, that the gospel of Jesus places a question mark next to all our perceived "have-to's," all our commonsensical notions, and whatever our culture insists upon as the agreed-upon obvious of all decent folk. Among Americans who self-consciously aspire toward Christian practice (or who seek an affiliation with what are often called "conservative Christian values"), it only rarely struck anyone as controversial when I noted a distinction between the Kingdom of God on the one hand and America's perceived self-interest on the other, or when I insisted that the Word of the Lord is never a duet alongside the pronouncements of any principality, power, or nation-state.

As the times changed, I was often alarmed to find that what I'd taken to be commonly held, conservative Evangelical sensibilities would not always withstand the generalizations of the Bush administration's talk of war on terror. Stranger still, the term "Evangelical" would suffer such violence in America's recent, popular discourse that, like a worn down currency, it lately only rarely serves to faithfully describe the tradition I've found so appealing. What follows is an account of some of the books which formed the sensibilities (in aspiration, deeply Evangelical) I try to faithfully portray in *The Gospel According to America*.



Some of my earliest, redemptively unsettling experiences with literature center on the figure of Fyodor Dostoevsky. It might sound odd to cite a Russian novelist as an important factor in trying to sort through America's relationship with the Judeo-Christian tradition, but I think it was the intensity with which he presumed God's scandalously affectionate posture toward murderers, prostitutes, and atheists that caught me off guard concerning my attitudes toward my own culture. He "out-radicalled" what I'd taken to be a sufficiently radical Christian upbringing. And after Dostoevsky, any talk of the grace of God or the sinfulness of humans was usually too tame, polite, or culturally-colored to pass for robust orthodoxy. In *The Brothers*

**"I tell you, the crazy thing  
about a lot of us in this here  
and now is that we sure as hell  
know how crazy a lot of others  
are, but we're not on to how  
deaf, dumb, and blind we can be  
to ourselves, about ourselves—  
how lost we sometimes are,  
no matter how clever we think  
we've become."**

*Karamazov* (1880; Vintage, 1991), for instance, the Elder Zosima offers a confession which, echoing the Apostle Paul, devastates whatever moral hierarchy or sense of just deserts we have in mind when we think of enemies, terrorists, or people who vote differently from ourselves: "Each of us is guilty in everything before everyone, and I most of all." The human confession of mutual "screwed-upness" marks all things Dostoevskian, and as you enter his world, the sound of moral fastidiousness on the part of preachers, politicians, and talk radio impresarios begins to feel almost demonic.

From there, Walker Percy was the closest thing to an American Dostoevsky. A short and hilarious

introduction to some of the ideas lurking in his novels is explored to great effect in *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux, 1983). He demonstrates that serious cultural criticism and ethical reflection can be earnest *and* funny. Borrowing from Flannery O'Connor, he coined the phrase, "God-blessed, Christ-haunted," and while I can't imagine Percy ever accepting a label as modest as *lay* theologian, it's hard to find a more astute critic of modern America in light of Jesus' gospel. Like Malcolm Muggeridge, he has lots of fun at other people's expense, but he often seems most powerfully amused with and unimpressed by himself.

Percy's friend and self-described "committed fan," Robert Coles, recounts a casual observation Percy once made apropos of all things human: "I tell you, the crazy thing about a lot of us in this here and now is that we sure as hell know how crazy a lot of others are, but we're not on to how deaf, dumb, and blind we can be to ourselves, about ourselves—how lost we sometimes are, no matter how clever we think we've become." Coles' treasuring of this remark is indicative of his role as a pivotal conversationalist and a crucial archivist for our time, and an especially valuable record of such conversations comes our way in *The Geography of Faith: Underground Conversations on Religious, Political, and Social Change* (1971, Jewish Lights Publishing, 2001). At the height of Daniel Berrigan's fugitive period, a time in which he eluded the grasp of the FBI, following his participation in a ceremonial burning of draft files in Catonsville, he sat down with Coles for a series of conversations. As a psychiatrist, Coles was especially intrigued by Berrigan's ruminations on mental health (often defined from the top down within any culture) and his understanding of a vocation of hopefulness in troubled times. Reading Berrigan and Coles on Bonhoeffer would be enough to make the book worthwhile, but it is so much more. It enlivens any discussion on the meaning and the cost of Christian witness.

On the subject of witness amid tribal, nationalistic, or commercial fervor, two works do an especially fine job of testifying to the investigative power (or the anthropological revelation, if you like) of the gospel. As a thumbnail sketch of his work, Rene Girard's *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Orbis Books, 2001) explains the scapegoat mechanism, the mimetic rivalry that consistently fuels it, and the Christ event as

the pivotal unmasking of sacred violence that begins to turn the madness around. After a little exposure to Girard, prayers of confession and admissions of short-sightedness can take on brighter colors, and the notion of the Holy Spirit's conviction of wrongdoing in human history takes on a more cosmic application than popular American Christianity usually affords. Gil Bailie's *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (Crossroad Publishing, 1995) provides an incredibly helpful account of the gospel as a demythologizing virus challenging any and all mythic realities. As something of a self-conscious popularizer of Girard, he notes that we bear false witness to the gospel when we're blind to all the ways we constantly deride it with our speech, our actions, and our unkind imaginings:

Only in contrition does the Christian believer or the Christian community achieve lucidity. Only in repentance is either truly faithful. To measure the spiritual vitality of the Christian movement by any other standard is to miss its astonishing uniqueness. Contrition is the specifically Christian form of lucidity.

This is the kind of work which, to my mind, out-conservatives the voices that only *think* they're being Christianly conservative or who've come to mistake their self-affixed labels for genuinely careful thinking. An appeal to traditionally Christian contrition can often serve as a redemptive antidote to rampant triumphalism among people of faith in America.

One of the many books that compels me to try and think critically concerning my own tendency to view Jesus through America-colored glasses is K. K. Yeo's *Chairman Mao Meets the Apostle Paul: Christianity, Communism, and the Hope of China* (Brazos Press, 2002). Especially helpful is the way Yeo brings Maoism and First and Second Thessalonians into conversation and models a way of engaging ideologies redemptively. It's somewhat reminiscent of Paul's proclamation before the philosophers of Athens. Upon encountering Yeo's work, I found myself wondering more about the ways our take on Christianity can suffer cultural captivity and how I might become more international, more radically catholic, in my vocation as an aspiring disciple of Jesus.

With this in mind, David L. Edwards' *Christianity: The First Two Thousand Years* (Orbis Books, 1997) is an excellent primer for ecumenical thinking as it tries to reflect a world-wide narrative of Christian history. On the resurrection, Edwards writes:

Many thought then, and have continued to think, that what the Christians believed was an illusion, but if that was the case it may still be reckoned the most influential of all the experiences which rightly or wrongly have persuaded people that human existence is after all not ultimately pointless or merely tragic. And if it was an illusion, it was not comfortable.

I'm grateful for any writing that drives me to view my own cultures with more interest and affection while simultaneously reminding me that all our particular mythic realities are just a drop in the bucket. Edwards delivers, reminding us that we have yet to begin to fathom the anthropological significance of the risen Lord.

Much in Edwards' account seems to recollect the language of Jürgen Moltmann, whose *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (1974, Fortress Press, 1993) places Jesus' career at the center of any discussion of the church's intersections with the cultures of the watching world:

In a civilization that glorifies success and happiness and is blind to the sufferings of others, people's eyes can be opened to the truth if they remember that at the centre of the Christian faith stands an unsuccessful, tormented Christ, dying in forsakenness. The recollection that God raised this crucified Christ and made him the hope of the world must lead the churches to break their alliances with the powerful and to enter into the solidarity of the humiliated.



While looking hard at the wide range of developments of Christian doctrine as they've made their way through history, Edwards never lets us forget the events upon which any faithful witness must articulate itself.

It seems that the mind I most want to foist upon friends and neighbors is also the figure I've had the least success endearing upon anyone at all. The prose of John Howard Yoder is often difficult to digest, but I continue to insist that his density is never without purpose. It probably wouldn't be to anyone's advantage in terms of accessibility for me to try to write like Yoder, but the book that most effectively says what I hope to urge upon the readers of my book is *For the Nations: Essays Public & Evangelical* (Eerdmans, 1997). With "Seek the peace of the city where I have sent you," Yoder marks the Jeremian shift which calls the diaspora of God to live *for the nations*. As we might guess, the Constantinian shift would complicate our understanding of this vocation, but Yoder wants to take us back to the root meaning of "Evangelical," namely "having to do with being bearers of good news for the world." How to remain faithful to this calling as sojourners in the land called America is the question before us. Yoder reckons that actual followers of Jesus are an outvoted minority just about everywhere, but they are called to "address to the wider society, including the state, and to the persons exercising power within it, the invitation, as good news, to participate, in their own best interest, in the cosmic meaning of the sovereignty of their risen Lord." By grace, the congregated are "empowered to discern, more visibly and more validly than the Caesars and the Cromwell" what it means to be taught to pray "Your kingdom come." As we seek to speak and live a true witness, we can be comforted by the promised potential of communal discernment and prayer and note that his gospel will not return void as we seek to proclaim it wherever two or more are gathered in his name. Amen.

**DAVID DARK** teaches English at Christ Presbyterian Academy in Nashville. He is the author of *Everyday Apocalypse* and *The Gospel According to America*. Reared in the Church of Christ, he is currently affiliated with a Presbyterian congregation, but would like to think he remains faithful to the Campbellite tradition.

